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Cover photograph: THE LIBERTY OF THE SUBJECT – *a cartoon of the press-gang at work, attributed to Thomas Rowlandson* (*National Maritime Museum, Greenwich*).

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THE NAVAL MUTINY AT SPITHEAD 1797

A. Temple Patterson

(FOREWORD – *This paper, which has had to be brought forward in the series at short notice, is unlike its predecessors in not being based on original research. It is merely a re-statement and assessment of an outstanding episode in the history of Portsmouth and of the British Navy.*)

The great French wars, as they used once to be called – the struggles with revolutionary and then Napoleonic France between 1793 and 1815 – have been described as a combat between the elephant and the whale, the strongest land-power and the strongest sea-power. In this combat sea-power triumphed. As the American naval historian A. T. Mahan put it, the 'far-distant storm-beaten ships' of Britain stood between France and the dominion of the world. Again and again the French beat down the armies of the Continent, only to find themselves confronted by the element which they could not conquer and which Britannia ruled – the sea. Again and again, by one device or another, they sought to circumvent that supremacy over the waves, and again and again they failed.

The moment when France's prospects of success were perhaps greatest, if she could have seized them – probably greater in reality than when Napoleon afterwards formed his grandiose invasion plan that broke down before Trafalgar was ever fought – came early, when the British Navy was suddenly paralysed by the discontent that drove the lower deck to mutiny in 1797. The morale of the country at that moment was relatively low. The first attempts at military co-operation with our continental allies against revolutionary France had ended unsuccessfully, and the last of these allies, Austria, had just been driven to make a disadvantageous peace by the brilliant young general Bonaparte who had now emerged to fame. Invasion threatened, and in 1796 a large French squadron, helped by luck and the slowness of Admiral Lord Bridport who commanded the Channel Fleet, had even reached Bantry Bay on the south-west coast of Ireland, from which it had been driven by stormy weather rather than the British Navy. A small force of French jailbirds in uniform had actually made a landing at Fishguard, only to be rounded up by the local fencibles, or home guard. The mass of the people were disheartened by the high and still rising price of food and the prospect of the unpromising war continuing indefinitely, with its heavy taxation, its high military expenditure and its damage to trade. A run on the Bank of England by well-to-do people anxious to convert their paper money into hard cash and hoard it had obliged the Government to suspend cash payments, and gloomy prophets of misfortune were predicting that English notes would depreciate into waste paper. Cries for peace arose; for now that the extremist Jacobin régime in France, with its avowed aim of spreading revolutionary democracy, had given place to the Directory, an apparently more reasonable set of people, many were arguing that it would be better to make peace with them than continue to waste blood and treasure in opposing a threat which it was held no longer existed. Negotiations were begun, but broke down when it was discovered that even the Directory had no intention of releasing their grip on Belgium, which had been seized by the French in the opening phase of the land war and which it had been British policy for centuries never to allow to pass into the hands of an enemy or potential enemy. The one comparatively bright feature of the situation was that the Navy, in spite of its slowness in the Bantry Bay business, was apparently still strong and sound. Lord Howe had defeated the French fleet on the Glorious First of June in 1794; and much more recently Sir John Jervis and Commodore Nelson had dealt France's ally Spain a staggering blow off Cape St. Vincent.

And then the country's one sure shield seemed to fall in splinters. On April 16th, when Bridport ordered the Channel Fleet to sea from Spithead, the sailors refused point-blank to weigh anchor.

Discontent on the lower deck had been growing for some time. The seamen's pay had not been increased since the middle of the seventeenth century, on top of which it was subject to deductions that sometimes reduced it to half its meagre nominal value. Moreover, it was often anything up to two years in arrears, or even more, and was issued in full only when a ship was paid off and then in the form of tickets which could be converted into cash at the port of commission alone and which the men were consequently obliged to dispose of to Jews and bumboat-women* at a heavy discount. Food was short and vile. Poor in quality and under weight when it came aboard, it was reduced further in both by ships' pursers who appropriated the

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* 'Bumboat-women' came out in sailing wherries (which they often steered themselves) to ships lying at Spithead and other anchorages, in order to sell fresh provisions – and also forbidden but concealed flasks of brandy – to the seamen at exorbitant prices.

THE PURSER – *a water-colour by Thomas Rowlandson painted at Spithead, c. 1799 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich).*

better provisions in order to sell them privately. They also served out the oldest stores from the hold first, with the result that the salt beef might have been below for years and become so hard that the men could carve it into models and charms as they might carve wood. Ships' biscuits had to be banged on the table before they were eaten, to knock out the weevils. Water was kept in wooden casks in which a teeming scum formed after a couple of weeks at sea, though the rum which was mixed with it to form the grog ration may have killed some of the animalculae. Impressment, usually accompanied by brutal violence and sometimes resisted by counter-violence*, not only snatched men from the privateers and the better-paid merchant service but, in time of war at least, sometimes took landsmen of the lower classes who had fallen in the way of the press-gang. Discipline was maintained by formal and ferocious flogging supplemented all too often by less formal blows and beatings; and if the more humane commanders (who included many of the best†) used the lash but sparingly, there were plenty of sadistic brutes who made the lives of their ships' companies a hell. Under these circumstances it can easily be understood that shore leave while ships were in port was virtually unknown, for fear of desertion, with the result that seamen might not see their wives and families (who were generally left dependent on poor relief) for years at a time.

As early as 1795 Captain Philip Patton, the transport officer at Portsmouth whose work it was to deal with the tenders bringing newly-pressed men, had reported to the First Lord of the Admiralty (who disregarded the warning) that a general mutiny was possible. In the same year two acts of Parliament were passed for the recruitment of the Navy, the first of which required each county to raise a number of men roughly proportional to its population, while the second called on each port to supply a quota of recruits. Local authorities met these requirements in part by a species of jail delivery, sending poachers, beggars, minor thieves and pickpockets, and in part by offering bounties for voluntary enlistment. The 'quota men' secured by this latter means tended to be better educated than the average seaman, and indeed included men who had failed in some profession such as school-teaching or in business, run into debt, and been tempted by the bounties. Being more or less literate and occasionally having some powers of organisation, as well as perhaps being influenced by the democratic ideas which were beginning to circulate in the country, some of them set to work, as soon as they came up against the conditions of life on the lower deck, to encourage and even organise the almost dumb resentment that they found there. The apparent leading spirit at Spithead, a twenty-six-year-old quartermaster's mate named Valentine Joyce, was alleged by one account to have been a man of this stamp, a quota product who had kept a tobacconist's shop in Belfast and lost it when he served a sentence for sedition. It is difficult, however, to reconcile this unproven accusation made at the

* Perhaps the most striking case of this occurred when the Liverpool press-gang waylaid the Lancaster coach, took from it fifteen prime seamen belonging to the privateer *Stag*, and clapped them into the cells of their 'rondy' or local headquarters overnight as a preliminary to shipping them off in the morning. The redoubtable Captain Spence of the *Stag*, on hearing of this, mustered the remaining eighty men of his crew, rushed the rondy in a sudden night attack, released his men and selected eight more to take along with him into the bargain.

† Collingwood, one of the finest naval officers of any age, who hated and avoided flogging, once said to someone who spoke to him of the possibility of mutiny: 'Mutiny, Sir! Mutiny on my ship! If it should come to that, it must be my fault and that of every one of my officers!'

IN PORT – *an anonymous drawing of c. 1799 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich).*

PORTSMOUTH POINT – *an etching by Thomas Rowlandson in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.*

time with the sufficiently substantiated fact that his parents had evidently lived in Portsmouth for at least a considerable period, his father being an old soldier still serving in the garrison invalid corps*; nor does it seem likely – though it is perhaps not impossible – that he would have been promoted so soon and at so early an age if he had really been a landsman of such dubious antecedents.

What is undoubted is that a remarkable feat of undercover organisation was achieved undiscovered in the early part of 1797. Advantage was presumably taken of the only chance which men in different ships had of communicating with each other – the Sunday visiting on fine afternoons in port when boatloads of liberty men were allowed to row from ship to ship. Under the disguise of convivial hospitality, of hosts showing guests around their ship, of yarn-spinning, gambling and the like, the men must have made their arrangements. There had already been occasional letters of protest against brutal treatment and petitions for better pay and victuals from individual ships' companies to the Admiralty; but these now gave place to a single petition drawn up apparently by a committee, concentrated upon the one point of pay, and circulated to be copied separately by each ship. The copies, or eleven of them at any rate, were then somehow smuggled ashore (perhaps in the pockets of captains' boats' crews, or *via* fleet tenders) and posted, not to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to whom the petition was addressed, but to Admiral Lord Howe as an intermediary who, it was hoped, would present them to Their Lordships.

'Black Dick' Howe, whose record of distinguished service went back forty years to the Seven Years' War, was the leading British admiral of the generation before Nelson. Despite his saturnine complexion and his normally uncompromising visage (which nevertheless could break into a surprisingly sunny smile), he was popular with the lower deck, who related how after leading them to victory he would come down to the orlop deck bringing wine from his cabin to the wounded and sit and talk to them commiseratingly and encouragingly. But Black Dick was seventy-one years old, retired, and nursing his gout at Bath. He looked at the petitions, saw that they were 'all exact copies of each other . . . without any signature', and concluded that they were 'fabricated by some malicious individual, who meant to insinuate the prevalence of a general discontent in the Fleet'. He wrote, however, to Lord Hugh Seymour, a Commissioner of the Admiralty at Portsmouth, asking whether any such discontent had been noticed. Seymour made a few perfunctory enquiries and replied that it had not. Nevertheless, when Howe's gout allowed him to go to London, he took the petitions to the Admiralty, where they were shown to Lord Spencer, the First Lord. Spencer has been described as 'a truly good-hearted man', but his reaction was the politician's one of horror at the notion of applying to Parliament for more money in a time of heavy taxation and financial stringency. He therefore decided that the best thing was to do nothing.

The men waited a month and concluded that Black Dick had let them down. They then resolved to send a petition directly to Parliament and, after returning to Spithead from a cruise under Bridport's command, to refuse to put to sea again until their demands were listened to. By this time lower-deck informers had begun to report that grievance meetings were going on daily in many vessels and papers were passing from ship to ship, but Bridport, who was almost as old as Howe himself, whom he had succeeded in the command of the Channel Fleet, took no action. On the evening of April 12th, Captain Patton, more alert than most of his superiors, became aware of what was in the wind. On the 13th, when his duties took him out to the *Queen Charlotte*, Howe's former flagship†, at Spithead, he found the crew gathered in arguing groups on the foredeck and even trespassing on the quarterdeck, with the officers doing nothing to prevent them. Hastening ashore, he hurried to the newly-installed 'telegraph' (or, as we should say, semaphore) on Southsea beach (to the east of the later Clarence Pier), and sent off the message, 'Mutiny brewing at Spithead'. Relayed to a similar semaphore frame on Portsdown Hill, and thence to Telegraph Hill near Petersfield, Blackdown, Hanscomb, Cabbage Hill, Putney and Chelsea Hospital, it was read on the Admiralty roof in a very few minutes. On the following morning an express despatch from Bridport arrived in London, reporting that 'disagreeable combinations' were being formed, especially in *Queen Charlotte*. My Lords sent him orders, which he received on April 16th, to prepare to put to sea and as a preliminary to send eight of the line under his subordinate Sir Alan Gardner down to St. Helen's, the usual starting-point for a cruise.

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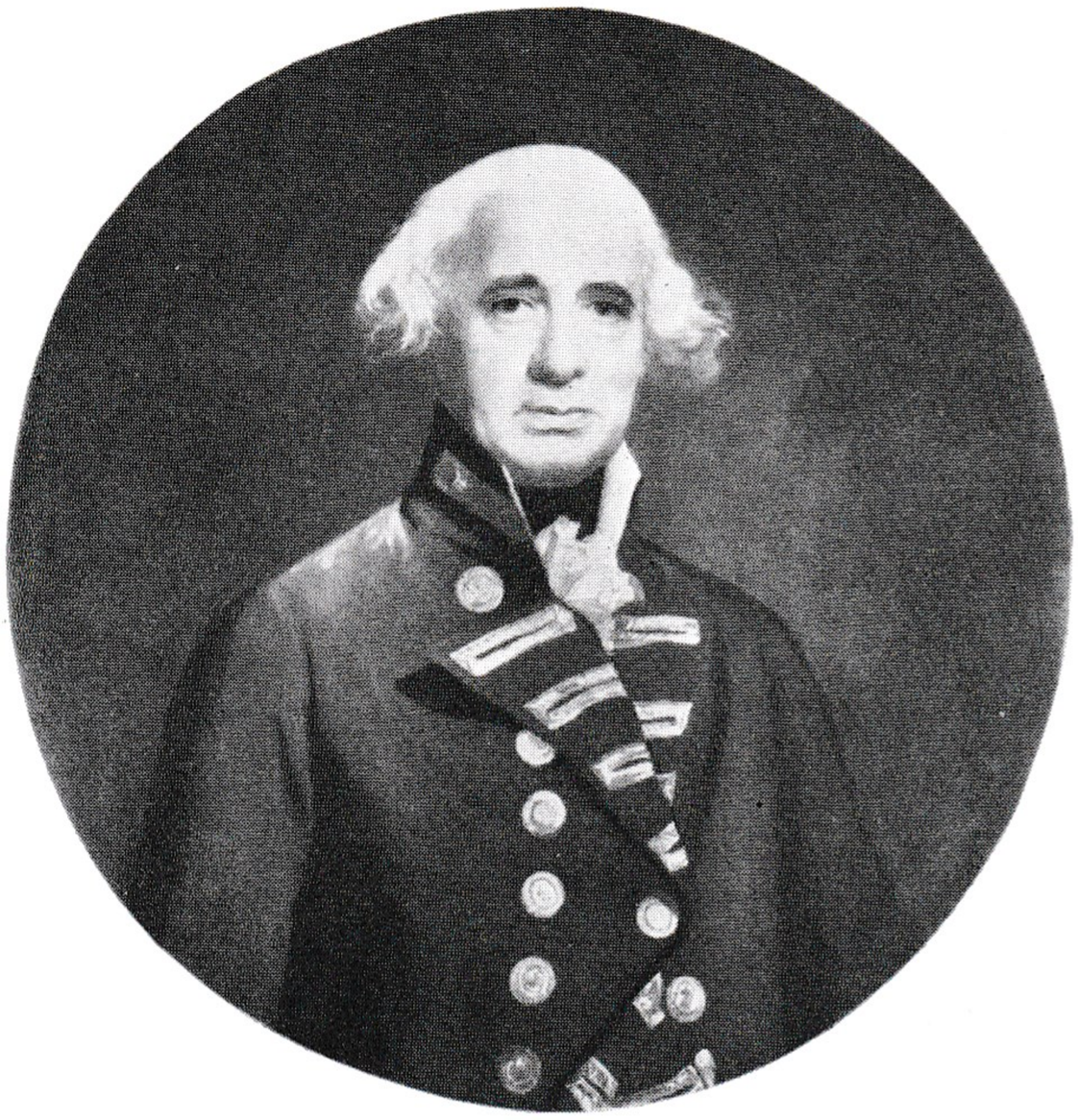
* 'Invalids' were old or disabled soldiers who were still fit, nominally at least, for garrison duty and were formed into units for that purpose.

† Bridport flew his flag in the *Royal George*.



EARL HOWE (*'Black Dick'*) *from a painting by John Singleton Copley in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.*

This egregious order staggered Bridport, who, though an indifferent commander, was by no means lacking in common sense. He had in fact on the previous day instructed his captains to muster his men and invite them to state their grievances in full and specific petitions. Now he replied to the Admiralty that he was convinced that his crews would not sail; but he did not feel that he could avoid passing on to Gardner the order to drop down to St. Helen's. When Gardner tried to carry it out he was met by an unanimous refusal to weigh anchor. Two boats, from the *Queen Charlotte* and the *Royal George* respectively, then visited the other ships to encourage their crews to stand fast. Joyce, speaking firmly but moderately, instructed them that they were to allow their officers to remain on board and were to obey all orders other than to set sail. Each crew was to elect two delegates and send them to a committee meeting that evening aboard the *Queen Charlotte*. When the boats reached the *London* Vice-Admiral Sir John Colpoys, a brave but imprudent martinet, posted his marines to resist the mutineers' coming aboard, while his crew yelled down encouragement to them to brave the lobster-backs' bayonets. While they were hesitating another boat came up with orders from Bridport to Colpoys not to resist. The commander-in-chief also instructed the captain of the *Queen Charlotte* to raise no opposition to the meeting of the delegates, and sent off another emissary post-haste to the Admiralty with an account of what had happened and with the fresh batch of petitions that he had already received in response to his invitation. 'I see no method of checking the progress of this business', he wrote, 'but by complying in some measure with the prayer of the petitions.' The emissary, Rear-Admiral Pole, riding relays of horses, arrived at midnight on the 16th; and within an hour My Lords had pig-headedly sent back another order to Bridport to put to sea (despite what Pole must have told them of the impossibility of his doing so), together with a message to be communicated to the men that 'their petitions would be taken into serious and immediate consideration as their importance required'. When Bridport relayed this barren formula to his ships it produced no result whatsoever.

Meanwhile two delegates apiece had been duly chosen, not only by the eight ships at St. Helen's but by each of the eight other line-of-battleships in the Fleet*. According to the unanimous testimony of all the officers, from Lord Bridport down, whose comments on the mutiny have survived, the delegates were 'the best men aboard', 'the good and leading men', 'the best behaved and reliable'. Not one of them was a mere ordinary seaman and only thirteen were A.B.s; many were petty officers and five were actually midshipmen (not then the commissioned rank it became later) of mature years who had worked their way up. 'This was no rabble of discontented scum, knowing nothing of the sea, but men whom their companions had learned to trust, the flower of all that was not quarterdeck'†. Several seem to have accepted election reluctantly but partly because they realised the need for a hard core of moderates on what had now become the government of the Fleet. Among the first measures they took as a committee was to call on the men to swear an oath to be true to their cause, a step designed to commit those who were not enthusiastic or who

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* The *Royal William*, flagship of the Port Admiral, Sir Peter Parker, does not seem to have joined the mutiny as a unit, though some of her crew did so as individuals.

† G. E. Manwaring and Bonamy Dobree, *The Floating Republic* (London, 1935), p. 36.

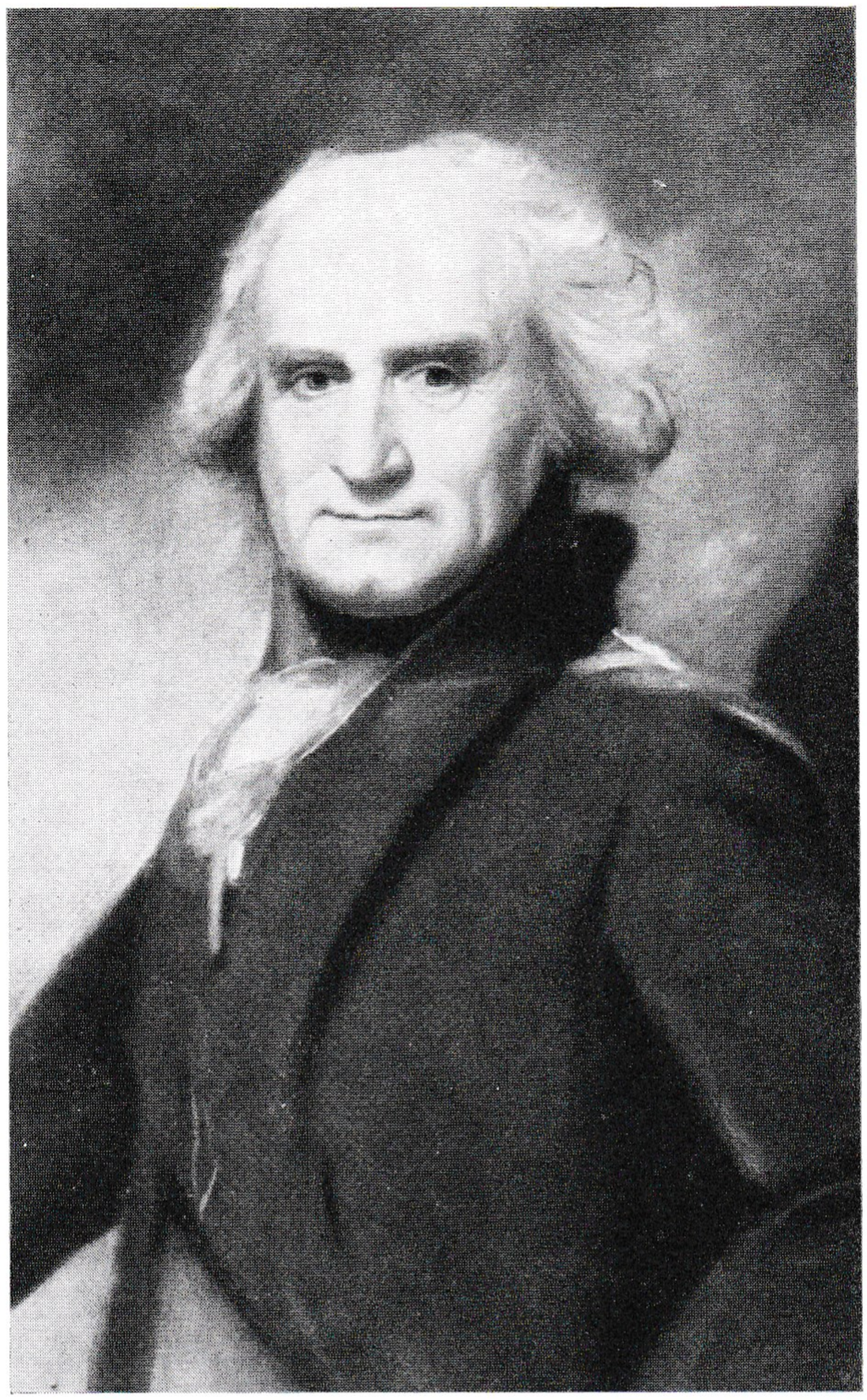
LORD SPENCER, *First Lord of the Admiralty, from a painting by John Singleton Copley in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.*

feared the consequences. Most of the petty officers took the oath, as also did the marines, who according to Bridport were at heart strongly in sympathy with the seamen whom they were traditionally supposed to police. Each ship seems to have had its own lower-deck committee, who now proceeded to hang ropes from the yardarms as a reminder to their own comrades that there must be no disorder or debauch. The spectators who were watching these proceedings from the shore read a sinister significance into these ropes, which they mistakenly thought were meant for the intimidation or execution of officers, whereas they were really tokens of the men's self-discipline. The central committee also decided that the mutiny must be confined to ships of the line, since frigates and sloops had important tasks they must continue to carry out. Thus when on the 17th the crews of the *Romney* and the *Venus*, which were under orders for convoy duty to Newfoundland, refused to sail the delegates immediately conveyed their 'desire and earnest wish' that they should obey those orders, which on the 20th they did.

By this time the First Lord of the Admiralty had at least begun to realise the seriousness of the situation, though belatedly and still incompletely. On the 17th Spencer decided to go down to Portsmouth himself, taking with him two of his colleagues. As soon as Bridport was informed of this intention he conveyed the news to the ships, with the result that the delegates, mightily impressed with the apparent success of their proceedings, set about preparing a longer list of demands, extending now to decent provisions, shore leave and better treatment of the sick and wounded. They also resolved to secure a pledge that Parliament should give the reforms the force of law, as well as a royal pardon for every man in the Fleet in order to prevent subsequent victimisation.

But these high hopes were doomed to disappointment. Although Spencer and his colleagues travelled through the night and set to work at once after arriving at Portsmouth at noon on the 18th, they had no intention of making any direct contact with the men. Establishing themselves at the Fountain Inn, they summoned Bridport and other officers to meet them. When Bridport laid before them the new petition which the delegates had now drawn up they refused to consider it and confined themselves to the original issue of pay, offering increases from 22s. a month to 26s. 6d. for petty officers and able seamen and from 19s. to 22s. for ordinary seamen. They also subdivided the latter rating, in the rather fatuous hope of dividing the mutineers, by creating a new category of 'landsmen', who were to receive only 21s. a month. These terms were taken by Admirals Gardner, Colpoys and Pole to the *Queen Charlotte*, where the delegates received them politely and told them they would give them their answer at ten the next morning. In fact, however, the poverty of the Admiralty's offer caused such prolonged debate on the committee that their reply was not handed in until four in the afternoon. In it they asked for 1s. 6d. a month more for all ratings and marines than the Admiralty had offered, refused to recognise the new category of landsmen, repeated their demands for better rations, and ended by declaring that 'until the grievances before stated are redressed, and an act of indemnity passed, we are determined not to lift an anchor; and the grievances of particular ships [that is, about brutal treatment by officers] must be redressed'.

By the time this reached the great men from the Admiralty, who must have been growing more and more impatient, they were at dinner, and their first reaction as the wine circulated was to compose an uncompromising and even threatening rejoinder to the effect that the delegates' reply had 'not even any



LORD BRIDPORT, *Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, from a painting by F. L. Abbott in the Maritime Museum, Greenwich.*

relation to the situation of seamen in His Majesty's Navy', that 'it has been and ever will be our intention that provisions shall be of the best quality' and that 'the quantity now served is sufficient'. Repeating their previous pay offer, they instructed Bridport to have his captains read this ultimatum to their respective ships' companies, giving them an hour to accept it or suffer possible 'dreadful consequences'. After this, as the wine-fumes began to clear, they decided not to send it, and instead summoned Bridport and his three flag-officers and sixteen captains to a conference next morning.

At this conference Spencer and his colleagues were reluctantly persuaded by the seagoing officers that further negotiation was the only solution. They were not prepared, however, to budge far. They agreed to raise the pay increase to what the men asked for, but retained the category of landsmen, refused to discuss rations, shore leave or other grievances, and reiterated the demand that their terms must be accepted immediately. Nevertheless, when the captains read this new offer to their crews, discreetly taking no notice of the last item, the general reaction of the men was at first one of satisfaction. Captain Holloway of the *Duke* had indeed almost persuaded his men to return to duty when a voice from the safety of the rear ranks sang out: 'Wait and see what the *Queen Charlotte* does!'. This found approval, and the same feeling was expressed on every ship; the men would await the decision of the council of delegates. As the representatives of the *Royal Sovereign*, Gardner's flagship, were rowed away to attend this council they promised the admiral to send him immediate word of the result. Gardner, however, became impatient and decided to go across himself, taking Colpoys and Pole with him, and speed up the proceedings by haranguing the delegates. On arriving the three flag-officers found that the meeting had not even started, but was awaiting the return of Joyce and three others of the council who were on shore. Gardner therefore tried to seize what seemed to him the opportunity of their absence to talk the men round, reinforcing his arguments by a further note which Captain Holloway had brought from Spencer, declaring that:

> '. . . if the men from the several ships assembled in the *Queen Charlotte* do not immediately accede to the terms offered they may rely on it (they being all well known) that they will be brought to condign punishment and suffer the utmost vengeance of the law. But, on the contrary, should they submit with alacrity, they will experience the forgiveness for which the Board of Admiralty have publicly and solemnly pledged their faith to them.'

Armed with this mixture of threat and blandishment, Gardner was making some headway when Joyce and his three companions suddenly entered. Quickly gathering the sense of what was going on, Joyce immediately insisted that the only security that could be relied upon was a direct pardon for them all from the King himself and that until they had that there could be no return to duty. The meeting swung at once to this view, and Gardner lost his temper. 'You're a damned mutinous blackguard set that deserves hanging!' he bellowed; and then, grabbing a man by the collar, 'I'll hang you and I'll hang every fifth man in the Fleet!' The delegates, backed by the crew of the *Charlotte* now crowding into the great cabin, closed round the three admirals and hustled them unceremoniously off the ship.

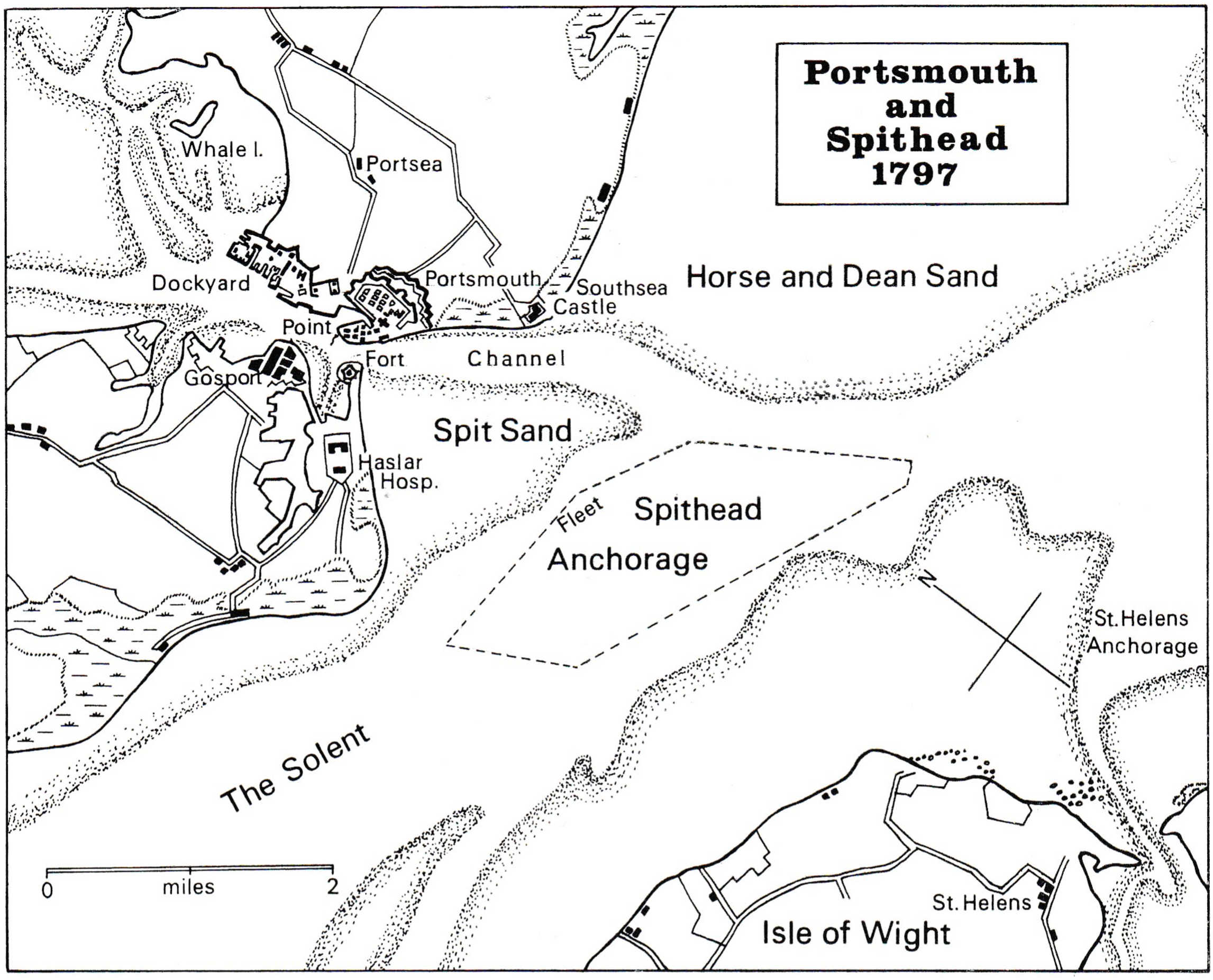
Joyce and his fellow-delegate from the *Royal George*, an Aberdonian A.B. called John Morrice, then resolved to call another meeting on their own ship and hoisted the pre-arranged signal, a red flag. But, since this was normally flown only when a ship was going into action, the officers on board and the crowds of watchers on shore alike assumed that its appearance meant bloody revolution – all the more readily since the delegates, angered by Gardner's outburst, ordered the guns to

be mounted, the Fleet prepared for action, and the officers placed in respectful confinement. This at last convinced Spencer that if nothing but a royal pardon would bring the men back to duty, then a royal pardon there must be. He summoned his carriage and set off at midnight for London. Arriving at 9 a.m. on the next day but one, he prevailed on Pitt, the Prime Minister, to call an immediate meeting of the Cabinet, and at five o'clock drove off again with him to Windsor to see the King. His Majesty readily agreed to a proclamation of pardon being issued, and it was at once drawn up and then duly signed and sealed in the presence of a privy council summoned for 9 p.m. A waiting Admiralty messenger then galloped back with it to London, where one hundred copies were printed before midnight and carried off by night riders to arrive in Portsmouth at a quarter to seven the next morning, after which they were distributed to be read to the mutinous ships' companies. Bridport himself read the proclamation aboard his flagship and made a speech promising a general redress of grievances, whereat the crew cheered, unreeved the ropes from the yardarms, and rehoisted his flag in place of the red banner. Voices from the back of the crowd pointed out, however, that there was still no satisfactory answer from the Admiralty to the men's fuller demands, and that even if these were now conceded the concessions would have to be ratified by Parliament. On the *Queen Charlotte* and the other ships the red flag still flew, for the delegates, assembling again, were insisting on seeing the authentic original of the proclamation with the King's own seal on it. Fortunately this had been sent down to Bridport, and when it was shown to them they professed themselves satisfied, whereupon the crew of the *Charlotte* cheered, removed the yard-ropes and hauled down the bloody flag. One by one the other ships followed suit, and the trouble seemed to be over. About seven in the evening Captain Holloway came on shore 'to announce the happy tidings to the anxious spectators waiting the result. . . . All the boats from the other ships followed, and the seamen in each on landing declared the business most happily settled. . . . The intelligence was received with the most excessive joy by the people on shore.'

Among the civilian population of Portsmouth there was much sympathy with the men's demands. They were growing tired of the war, which had brought to the town many wives and children of seamen who, being ill-paid or unpaid and not allowed to leave their ships, could not care for them or send them home, so that they became dependent on poor relief and swelled the poor-rates which Portsmouth householders had to pay. For several years the mayor and aldermen had petitioned the Government for relief, but without result. To many townsfolk, in fact, the chief difference between a fleet controlled by the Admiralty and one controlled by the delegates may have been that the latter, by allowing men to come ashore to parade and make crude speeches, were giving publicans and shopkeepers a chance to do a little better than usual. And, of course, the many relatives of seamen in the Fleet, like Valentine Joyce's parents, must almost certainly have sympathised with them. Nor were all the officers hostile, for if there were those like Captain Payne of the *Impétueux* who were convinced that there were 'secret Jacobin springs' behind the whole business, and Lieutenant Lord Camelford who warned Spencer that the Board would be kidnapped if it ventured aboard any ship, there were also more level-headed people such as Lieutenant Beaver of the *Monarch* who could not help admiring the men's 'moderation in so daring an exercise of illegal power' and wrote to his sister that 'the seamen still continue to conduct themselves incredibly well, performing the usual duties with alacrity and behaving towards their officers with the greatest respect', adding 'I had always great respect for an English seaman; I like the character now better than ever.'

At this point it seemed that Lord Bridport could at last take the Channel Fleet to sea – or most of it, for four ships' companies were still moodily awaiting the outcome of their complaints against brutal officers. Leaving these four at Spithead under the command of Colpoys in the *London*, he therefore took six of the line to St. Helen's to await immediate sailing orders.

But here things began to go awry once more, producing what was really the second Spithead mutiny. On that same evening the Admiralty sent Bridport its reply to the seamen's fuller demands of three days earlier. Refusing to see any need to reform the methods of provisioning the Navy, Their Lordships declared that although there was a general shortage of meat in the country at the moment, it had 'always been [their] intention to cause the full proportion of fresh beef to be supplied', asserted that more fresh vegetables had been provided while the Fleet was in port 'than was ever served in any former war' and expressed their opinion that the men 'should be most thankful for that . . . instead of unreasonably asking for more'. They also declined to increase the pensions at Greenwich Hospital, as had been requested, and announced that no officers complained of would be removed



without application through the proper channels for courts-martial, adding that 'as the characters of officers are not to be lightly attacked, the seamen should be admonished not to prefer any complaint against them without . . . good cause'. Bridport simply suppressed this reply.

He could not, however, suppress the change of wind that presently brought a whistling gale which prevented him from putting to sea. Meanwhile Spencer, relapsing from the remarkable speed he had shown in getting the King's pardon, allowed several days to elapse before notifying the proposed pay increase to the Privy Council, whose function it was to initiate money bills for Parliament.

In the minds of the unsophisticated seamen, who had thought that three or four days at most would suffice for the pay promises to be given the force of law, suspicion arose and became a conviction that they were being tricked after all. As if to confirm this belief, the Admiralty sent down to the captains of ships an order which has been rightly called 'a masterpiece of folly', instructing them to tighten up discipline, see that the marines' arms and ammunition were kept in good order and ready for immediate service and 'be ready on the first appearance of mutiny to use the most vigorous means to suppress it, and bring the ringleaders to punishment'. Beyond imparting this order to their officers, the captains kept as quiet as they could about it, but men who noticed the marines' battle-chests being inspected and inventories taken of surgeons' stores could draw their own overheated conclusions. Moreover, while the committee of the Privy Council had been dallying over the pay proposals, a question had been asked in the House of Lords whether the ministers had any communication to make on recent events in the Navy, and had produced from Spencer the ill-advised or badly-worded answer that he had none to make and did not expect to have any. If anything was still needed to convince the seamen that they were being double-crossed, the newspaper reports of this exchange which presently found their way to Spithead and St. Helen's Roads were more than ample.

On the day before Parliament was due to consider the bill for an increase of seamen's pay the wind lessened, veered and became favourable for Bridport to sail. He knew better, however, than to give the order, since he was certain that the men would not obey it

unless, as he wrote to the Admiralty, 'the vote of supply in the House of Commons for the increase . . . should arrive, and give the crews of the Fleet satisfaction'. He had scarcely sanded his letter when the second mutiny broke out. A pre-arranged outburst of concerted cheering rang across the water from almost all the ships at St. Helen's, ropes reappeared at the yardarms, and the red flags were run up again. Boats began to be rowed from ship to ship, for mutual encouragement and to coerce laggards, and the officers of several ships were sent ashore, though actual violence does not seem to have been used. The delegates then resolved to lead a procession of boats to Spithead with the object of inducing the crews of the ships of the line which still remained there to join them again and bring their vessels to St. Helen's where they would be out of range of the shore batteries of Portsmouth and whence they could escape to sea if other ships were sent against them.

At Spithead Captain Edward Griffith of the *London* reported to Sir John Colpoys, who was his uncle, what his telescope had shown him of the happenings at St. Helen's. The Vice-Admiral, freed from the restraining hand of Bridport, who was ashore writing another and more despondent letter to the Admiralty, determined to resist. He had all hands mustered on deck, and after Griffith had read them the Articles of War, asked them first whether they knew what was taking place at St. Helen's, to which they replied that they did not, and then whether they had any grievances remaining. Here an ambiguity occurred, for Colpoys meant, had their grievances been satisfied, whereas the men took him to be asking if they had any further ones which had not been stated, and again answered 'No'. Fortified by the mistaken belief that they would remain docile, Colpoys then ordered them below (though some stayed on deck forward) and commanded the lower-deck guns to be run in and the port-lids closed, to prevent communication with the boats now approaching from St. Helen's when they should come alongside. Stationing his officers and marines to guard the closed hatchways and entries, and keeping some with him to confront the men who had remained on the forecastle, the Admiral stood grimly watching the oncoming procession.

The boats from Spithead first ran alongside the *Marlborough*, seventy-four, whose unpopular captain offered no resistance, whereupon the delegates told her company to put him ashore along with any other officers who had maltreated seamen, and then to take the ship down to St. Helen's. Meanwhile, the men confined below in the *London* were beginning to try to push up the hatchways. Officers called to Colpoys: 'Shall we fire, if necessary?' and got the answer: 'Yes, certainly'. A rush on the hatchways started, and the officers opened a fire which was returned by some seamen with small-arms. Several on both sides were wounded, including three seamen fatally, and Colpoys called on his marine captain to bring his men into action, but only two (both foreigners) obeyed their officer, the rest throwing down their muskets or deserting to join the mutineers. Recognising the futility of further resistance, Colpoys bellowed 'Cease fire!' and retreated with his officers to the poop, whereat the delegates came scrambling aboard. Some of the *Londons*, maddened by the sight of wounded and dying comrades, seized the young first lieutenant, Peter Bover, who had shot down one of the men on the forecastle who were trying to unlash a gun and turn it on to the quarterdeck, dragged him forward, rove a yard-rope and passed the noose round his neck. His life was saved only by a strange conjunction of rescuers – Joyce, who had served under him in another ship and now battled his way forward through the yelling crowd, shouting that if they hanged Bover they must hang him too, and Colpoys, who came dashing forward again to take advantage of the momentary hesitation this had caused by shouting that Bover was only acting under his orders and that he took entire responsibility for what his officers had done. 'You're a damned bloody scoundrel!' roared a voice, whereupon several men turned on the speaker and shouted 'How dare you speak to the Admiral in that manner?' The ship's surgeon in his turn then pleaded with the men to listen to Colpoys, and in the tense explosive quiet that followed the latter explained that he himself was only obeying orders very recently received from the Admiralty. The mutineers at first refused to believe in the reality of any such orders, and Colpoys had some difficulty in persuading them to let him go under escort to his cabin to produce them. Having spent as long as he dared in pretending to hunt for his keys, in order to give blood time to cool, he then took from his desk the Admiralty general order of a few days earlier enjoining commanding officers to 'be ready on the first appearance of mutiny to use the most vigorous means to suppress [it]', returned to the forecastle and read it. The delegates took it from him and marched him, Griffith and Bover below, to be confined in their cabins pending trial by a lower-deck court.

Throughout the ships at Spithead the next move was to put all the officers ashore – except, of course, the

three prisoners. The men wounded in the fighting on the *London*, after having their wounds dressed by the surgeon, were also taken ashore to Haslar Hospital, where the three who were mortally hurt died. The angry delegates demanded that they should be ceremonially buried in Kingston churchyard and that a funeral procession of seamen should be allowed to march through Portsmouth to escort them thither. This demand was furiously rejected by the military authorities, who had prepared the garrison to withstand attack, manned the fortifications, raised the drawbridges and laid the guns of the shore batteries, and were consequently not minded to admit the enemy (as they considered them) within the walls. For the moment there seemed a possibility that the refusal might bring on the very clash that was feared; but the able and level-headed mayor, Sir John Carter, intervened to arrange a compromise by which the coffins, after being rowed across from Gosport to the Hard in *London*'s barge, were carried from there to Kingston by a less provocative route, with a party of fifty men of the *London* marching behind and crowds that were mainly sympathetic lining the roadside.

By now the ships at Spithead, except for Sir Peter Parker's *Royal William* which was still succeeding in holding aloof from the mutiny, had been sailed round to St. Helen's, though not without some navigational mistakes. The burning questions now were the fate of the 'Seamen's Bill' in Parliament and that of Colpoys, Griffith and Bover at the hands of the men who held them prisoners. These two questions were in fact interdependent, in the sense that if the bill had been held up the prisoners' prospects might have been poor. But the alarming news of the second mutiny had at last convinced everybody of the need for haste. A resolution approving an addition to the naval estimates in order to cover the increase in pay was passed through both Houses, and immediately embodied in a bill which was brought in at once and hustled through all its stages. Even before it had passed a copy of the resolution was rushed off to Portsmouth in the hope of quietening the seamen and saving the three captives. It was well received by the men, who at once promised to release Colpoys and Griffith, though they were reluctant to give up Bover. However, when all three men were summoned ashore to appear before a coroner's jury enquiring into the death at Haslar of the man Bover had shot, they agreed to let him go on his promising to return and surrender himself to them again. Although Bover's friends besought him not to risk his life by going back, after the jury had returned a verdict of 'justifiable homicide' he insisted on keeping his word and was received by the crew of the *London* with three cheers and not only given his liberty but asked to remain aboard. Bover, who had a reputation for bravery which had contributed to this result, agreed to do this, continuing to serve in the *London* until his promotion to commander in the following year. Colpoys, however, was never employed at sea again.

At this point the Cabinet, meeting to decide how best to present to the seamen the act just rushed through Parliament and how to deal with their remaining complaints, hit on the simple yet brilliant idea of sending Lord Howe down as a special emissary and plenipotentiary. Black Dick, who perhaps had something of a bad conscience about his failure to pay sufficient attention to the men's petitions at the beginning of the whole business, at once set off for Portsmouth, taking Lady Howe with him and travelling throughout a wild and rainy night. His selection for this rôle offended Bridport, who disliked him and felt that he himself, as Howe's successor in the command of the Channel Fleet, should have been chosen as the intermediary, especially as he had already shown restraint and common-sense at several critical moments. But he was too public-spirited, sensible, and perhaps one might add too generous a man to allow any hurt feelings to stand in the way of the public good, and he contented himself with writing to the Prime Minister:

> 'His Lordship [Howe] will find me ready to give every assistance in my power to obtain this most important and necessary object, which I hope the measure will produce without delay. . . .
> 'I have had . . . a most anxious time, and much to encounter with, and if I had not kept quite calm and composed, the consequences would have been more alarming.
> 'I have always considered peevish words and hasty orders detrimental, and it has been my study not to utter the one nor issue the other. I wish that rule had guided the conduct of those in higher situations, as I think it wiser to soothe than irritate disturbed and agitated minds. . . .'

All of which was very true and sound, but did not alter the fact that the situation required a man whose name was one to conjure with in the Navy, and Howe alone was that man.

Arriving in Portsmouth on the morning of Wednesday, May 10th, Black Dick left his wife at the house of the Governor (the garrison commander), collected Admirals Parker and Gardner, and set out by barge for St. Helen's. Coming alongside the *Royal George*, to which Bridport had betaken himself, he rejected all offers to help him up the side, paid his respects to the

commander-in-chief, had the ship's company called to the quarter-deck, and started in to talk to them as a man to men, with no reproaches, no standing on his dignity and no refusal to recognise the authority of the delegates. Three hours later he went on to the *Queen Charlotte* and began the work again there, and after that to the *Duke*. For three days altogether he went from ship to ship, talking, listening, making speeches, hoisting his rheumaticky knees and gouty feet up and down ladders, until he was so tired that he had to be lifted in and out of his boat. One of his greatest difficulties proved to be over the wording of the royal pardon, of which the men had become suspicious, since it contained the word 'promise'. This was a word of which they were now very wary, and the pardon had therefore to be sent back for redrafting. On the fourth day Howe appointed the delegates to meet him aboard the *Royal William*, where the removal of unpopular officers was discussed for two hours. He resisted name after name put forward, but in the end agreed to recommend to the Admiralty by telegraph the supersession of fifty-nine officers (about half of those who had been put ashore), including one admiral (Colpoys) and four captains. All the men's demands had now been conceded, except shore leave, which had not been pressed to an issue, and nothing apparently remained except the confirmation of the amended pardon. At this moment eight more ships of the line flying the red flag sailed into Spithead – the Western Squadron from Plymouth, also in revolt and with its admiral confined to his cabin, which had come to join the Channel Fleet. Promptly, Howe went aboard the flagship and talked the squadron also into line, at the price of agreeing to the removal of a further sixty-five officers and warrant officers*.

On the next day, Sunday May 14th, a formal reconciliation was planned to take place in the great cabin of the *Royal William*. The failure of the revised pardon to arrive in time spoilt this a little, but not seriously, and it was arranged to have a grand celebration on the following day. Howe was then escorted ashore by a procession of boats and received at Point by 'an immense multitude' cheering itself hoarse and by the delighted Lady Howe. They walked together to the Governor's house, where Joyce stepped forward respectfully to arrange the time at which the Admiral would embark again on the morrow, and then asked Lady Howe to honour the occasion with her company, assuring her that she need have no fear. She replied that she was not in the least afraid and would be delighted to come, after which her husband invited Joyce to come in and have a glass of wine with him. This the ex-mutineer leader accepted 'with a manly freedom, unaccompanied by the least particle of familiarity or rudeness'. To round off this truly English finish, news now came by the telegraph that the reworded pardon was on its way, and in fact it arrived in the early evening, brought by a rider who (with relays of horses) had made the journey from London in the record time of four and a half hours.

At dawn on Monday the procession of boats reappeared, with the leading one flying the Union Jack, and the delegates landed at the Sally Port. From there they marched to the Governor's house, headed by a band playing 'God Save the King' and 'Rule Britannia' alternately. Despite his fatigue, Howe had roused himself betimes, and he now invited them all into the house to drink wine with him and then took them on to the balcony to receive the thunderous applause of the crowd. He and Lady Howe then walked back with them to the Sally Port with the bands (for the marine band and various ships' bands had now arrived and joined in with gusto) blaring away in front. Here it seemed as if every boat in the Solent was waiting to take part in the triumphal procession. First went the boat with the Union Jack again, into which had been crammed as many bandsmen as possible, all still playing lustily; then the royal barge, with Howe alone; then the Governor and his staff; then Lady Howe and other ladies; then the delegates, and so on; the whole to a deafening firing of salutes from the platform. Howe went first to the *Royal George*, on whose quarterdeck he read out the pardon, showing it afterwards to the few seamen who could read. Then he went from ship to ship, finishing with the *Prince*, the Plymouth flagship, aboard which things were still a little uncertain. When he had dragged himself up her ladder, however, the boatswain bounded forward shrilling his pipe, a guard of honour fell in, and after the delegates had uttered a few terse and forcible words to the ship's company the Union flag was run up again, as by now it had been on all the vessels of the Channel Fleet. At six o'clock the boats returned once more to the Sally Port, with Howe so exhausted that he had to be lifted from the barge. The seamen who did so carried him on their shoulders back to the Governor's house with the Union Jack

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* The officers who were removed were retained on full pay and in due course employed again (except Colpoys).

held over his head, through crowds such as Portsmouth had never seen before, yelling their lungs out in rivalry with the crashing volleys of salutes which the troops were firing. Then, rallying his last energies, he invited them in to supper, before they rowed back to St. Helen's in the moonlight and reported for duty to the officers old and new who were now aboard their ships.

It was the last of the long line of victories Black Dick had won for England – the last and perhaps the greatest too. He must have slept well that night, so shortly before he fell asleep for ever.

Or perhaps it would only have been the greatest of his victories if it had been a complete and final one. For the example of the Spithead mutiny had sparked off another at the Nore on May 12th, just as Howe was completing his work of reconciliation. This proved much worse, more threatening and longer maintained. For the men at the Nore were ill-led, and though their grievances were really the same as those of the Channel Fleet they seem to have felt that they would look foolish if they brought their mutiny to an end almost as soon as it had begun, by accepting the same terms. Not to be outdone by their Spithead comrades, therefore, they devised a list of additional demands, of which shore leave, a fairer distribution of prize-money, and indemnity for former deserters who had returned to the service under false names were the chief. The vice-admiral in command at the Nore, Charles Buckner, was not only old (Bridport and Howe were both that) but feeble and ineffective; the Government and the Admiralty were not disposed to make any further concessions; and an impasse was reached in which for three weeks a 'floating republic' of mutinous ships controlled and for part of the time blockaded the mouth of the Thames, not without some gunfire, until increasing realisation of the hopelessness of success or even ultimate escape led ship after ship to surrender. In the outcome, the men's unhappy and ill-balanced 'president', Richard Parker, and twenty-eight others were executed, nine flogged and twenty-nine condemned to various terms of imprisonment.

Pitt's government was naturally convinced that the libertarian and democratic ideas which were in the air, and ultimately subversive French Jacobin influence, must be at the bottom of the whole business. A special agent sent down to Portsmouth while the Spithead mutiny was going on was unable to discover any such influence, however, and even of the Nore revolt he and a colleague (both London magistrates) reported that while 'wicked and designing men' had visited the ships they did not believe either that these had been officially delegated by any left-wing political societies or that they had had any real influence on the proceedings of the mutineers. On the other hand a modern historian, Professor E. P. Thompson, thinks that 'there is some evidence of direct Jacobin instigation' at the Nore at any rate; and while this hardly seems to hold good at Spithead it would be rash and even foolish to deny that many of the men even there must have been aware of and imbued perhaps rather crudely with the notions of the rights of men which were being voiced ashore. To say, however, that these men or at any rate these ideas had any perceptible influence on the course of events would be going too far. The Spithead mutiny was the coming to a head, precipitated, no doubt, by the circumstances and ideas of the time, of long and deeply felt grievances – no mere 'parochial affair of ship's biscuits and arrears of pay', but a refusal to submit any longer to monstrous and often illegal brutalities and scandalous deceptions.

Not that the results of even the relatively successful Spithead mutiny must be exaggerated. It improved the seamen's lot somewhat as far as pay and rations were concerned, but more than the removal of a number of officers to other ships was needed before the lesson was generally learnt that the men must be treated like human beings – treated in fact as officers like Collingwood had always treated them. The most that can be said, perhaps, is that it did something to open the eyes of the public to the conditions of lower-deck life in the Navy and that from then on, though only little by little, the seamen began to receive better treatment.

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